

About the Career Academy National Standards of Practice

Developed by an informal consortium of career academy organizations, the Career Academy National Standards of Practice are framed around ten key elements of successful implementation, drawn from many years of research and experience from all parts of the country.

High school reform has to be centered in the community and responsive to its needs and the needs of its students. To help meet these needs, communities and school districts should offer a wide range of learning options for adolescents that are located both in the high school and in the wider community. Career academies are one of several models or initiatives that communities and school districts can make available to high school students. By bridging school and the world of work in a way that leads to academic achievement, career academies have been successful in engaging many students who would otherwise be indifferent to or possibly lost from school.

Career academies should be acknowledged and supported for their contribution to high school reform. They have blazed many trails in breaking up large high schools into smaller ones, creating personalized learning for young people, making learning relevant by using careers as a context for learning, and helping adolescents learn about future career opportunities and connect in meaningful ways with adults who want to see them succeed. As a reform initiative, career academies have proven their value. With ongoing improvement suggested by the National Standards of Practice, and widely known best practices, career academies are well positioned to lead and influence high school reform efforts and policy debates. Educators and policymakers should rely on the central elements of a career academy and use the National Standards of Practice as a guide to help develop effective high school reforms with positive outcomes for students.

The following organizations contributed to the development of the National Standards of Practice and support academy development through their respective models:

- Career Academy Support Network (CASN)
- National Academy Foundation (NAF)
- National Career Academy Coalition (NCAC)
- National Center for Education & the Economy (NCEE) America's Choice
- Southern Regional Education Board (SREB) High Schools That Work
- Talent Development High Schools/Center for Research on Education of Students Placed at Risk (CRESPAR)

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I. Defined Mission & Goals.

The career academy has a written definition of its mission and goals. These are available to the administrators, teachers, students, parents, advisory board, and others involved in the academy. These include at least the following elements:

- To focus on college and career.** A career academy's aim is to prepare students for college and careers. Academies enable students to complete college entrance academic requirements while exposing them to a vertical segment of the occupations within a career field, encouraging them to aim as high as they wish.
- To raise student aspirations and commitment.** An academy seeks to increase the level of students' motivation while in high school. The biggest limiting factor in many youths' future plans is not their ability, but where they set their sights.
- To increase student achievement.** An academy provides support to its students to increase their achievement in high school. This comes through close relationships with teachers and fellow students; rigorous and relevant curriculum; and exposure to career and educational options outside the high school.

II. Academy Structure.

An academy needs to have a well defined structure within the high school, reflecting its status as a small learning community.

- Cross-grade articulation.** The academy incorporates at least two grade levels, ending in the senior year, with articulation in its teacher team, curriculum and instruction across grade levels.
- Student selection.** Entry to the academy is voluntary. The recruitment/selection process is written and widely available. New students are provided an orientation to the academy. Parents participate in this process and approve of their son or daughter's choice. Academy enrollment reflects the general high school population.
- Cohort scheduling.** Academy classes are limited to academy students, who take a series of classes together each year.
- Physical space.** Where possible, academy classrooms are near each other in the high school building. The academy Coordinator has access to communication outside the high school.
- Small size, supportive atmosphere.** The academy maintains personalization through limited size, teacher teamwork, and a supportive atmosphere.

III. Host District and High School.

Career academies exist in a variety of district and high school contexts, which are important determinants of an academy's success.

- Support from the Board of Education and Superintendent.** The district Board of Education is aware of the academy and its mission and goals, and is on public record in support. Likewise, the Superintendent publicly endorses the academy and offers active support. Both serve as academy liaisons to the broader community.
- Support from the principal and high school administration.** The high school principal and other administrators are knowledgeable of the academy, public advocates for it, and are actively involved in its funding, staffing and support. They contribute to a positive academy profile within the high school.
- Adequate funding, facilities, equipment and materials.** District and high school administrative support results in adequate academy funding, facilities, equipment and learning materials. These reflect a serious commitment from the district and high school to the success of the academy.

IV. Faculty & Staff.

Appropriate teacher selection, leadership, credentialing, and cooperation are critical to an academy's success.

- Teacher Leader(s)/ Coordinator(s).** One teacher (sometimes two) agrees to take the lead, serving as the academy Coordinator(s). This includes attending advisory board meetings, interacting with administrators and board members, managing the budget, helping to coordinate teacher professional development, and helping to coordinate employer, higher education, and parental involvement. Release time and/or a stipend is provided for this role.
- Teachers are credentialed in their field, volunteers in the academy, and committed to its mission and goals.** Since a career academy's success rests on good teaching and good teamwork among a cross disciplinary group of teachers, they must be well qualified and willingly involved in this role. They understand and support the philosophy and purpose of the academy, work together as a team, teach a majority of their classes in the academy, and cooperatively share the duties of operating an academy.
- Counselors, non-academy teachers, and classified staff are supportive.** Non-academy staff are also important to its operation. Counselors understand the need for cohort scheduling and provide this for academy students. Non-academy teachers understand the value of the academy and help in recruiting students for it and providing departmental support. Classified staff help support the academy facilities, equipment and learning materials.

V. Professional Development.

Since an academy places teachers and other adults into roles not normally included in their previous training, providing adequate professional development time, leadership and support is critical.

- Common planning time.** Academy teachers are provided regular common planning time within the regular high school schedule for purposes of program coordination, curricular integration, and resolution of student problems.
- Teacher professional development.** Academy teachers are provided with training in the academy structure, curricular integration, student support, and employer involvement, where necessary by experts from outside the high school.
- Employee & parent orientation.** Employee volunteers are adequately prepared for their roles as speakers, field trip hosts, mentors and internship supervisors. Parents are adequately prepared for their involvement (if any) as classroom aides, field trip chaperones and social event organizers.

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VI. Governance & Leadership.

The academy has a governing structure that incorporates the views of all stakeholders.

- Advisory board with broad representation.** The advisory board has members from the district and high school administration, academy teaching staff, supporting employers and institutions of higher education. It may also include community representatives, and academy parents and students. The board incorporates viewpoints from all members.
- Regular meetings.** Meetings of the board are held at least quarterly, with defined agendas and outcomes. The board helps to set policies for the academy. It also serves as a center of resource development.
- A healthy partnership.** Both through the advisory board and other interactions, there is evidence of a partnership between the academy/high school and its host community.
- A student voice.** Students have avenues through which they can provide input to the academy policies and practices.

VII. Curriculum & Instruction.

The curriculum and instruction within an academy meets or exceeds external standards and college entrance requirements, while differing from a regular high school by focusing learning around a theme.

- Meets external standards.** The academic curriculum is framed around state or national standards, and the career curriculum around industry and SCANS standards.
- Learning is rigorous and meets college entrance requirements.** Coursework reaches high levels of English and math, generally four years of each, in addition to substantial coursework in science and social studies. Graduates are qualified to attend four-year colleges and encouraged to do so.
- Curriculum is sequenced, integrated and relevant.** Curriculum articulates from the beginning of an academy through the senior year, with a defined course sequence and at least two core academic classes and one career/theme class each year. Curriculum is integrated among the academic classes and between these and the career class. Learning illustrates applications of academic subjects outside the classroom, incorporates current technology, and includes authentic project-based learning.
- Post-graduate planning.** Students have access to career and college information, are provided counseling in these respects, and develop a written post-graduate plan by the end of their junior year.
- Dual credit options.** The academy has articulation agreements with local two-and four-year colleges, offers dual credit courses and/or college credit for upperclassmen, and articulates its upper level curriculum with relevant college programs.

VIII. Employer, Higher Education & Community Involvement.

A career academy links high school to its host community and involves members of the employer, higher education and civic community in certain aspects of its operation.

- Career theme fits the local economy.** The academy career field is selected to fit with the community industries and employer base, to allow for adequate involvement of volunteer employees in certain of its activities.
- Community involvement.** Representatives of employers, higher education, and the community help to guide the academy's curriculum, and provide speakers, field trip sites, job shadowing opportunities, mentors, student internships, community service opportunities, college tours and teacher externships.
- Incorporates citizenship.** The academy fosters a culture of respect for others and encourages student contributions as citizens.
- Work/community based service learning.** The academy offers work and/or community based service learning opportunities for all interested students either through paid internships or community service.

IX. Student Assessment.

Improvements in student performance are central to an academy's mission. It is important to gather data that reflects whether students are showing improvement and to report these accurately and fairly to maintain the academy's integrity.

- Student data are collected.** These data include those necessary to describe the student body within the academy (e.g., grade level, gender, race/ethnicity) and its relationship to the high school in general, as well as student performance on a variety of outcome measures.
- Multiple academic measures are included.** Measures include a variety of accepted indicators of performance (e.g., attendance, retention, credits, grade point averages, state test scores, graduation rates, college going rates).
- Technical learning is assessed.** Measures include knowledge of the field's terminology, technical concepts, and ability to apply English, math, and other academic skills to authentic real world projects. Where appropriate, industry certification is incorporated.
- Accurate reporting.** Analyses of these data are reported accurately and fairly, regardless of the results.
- Evidence of impact.** These measures show whether, and how much, the academy improves student performance.

X. Cycle of Improvement.

No new academy functions perfectly. Even well established and operated academies benefit from self-examination and refinement. Ensuring and improving the quality of a career academy requires engaging in a regular cycle of improvement.

- Academy implementation is examined.** Program leaders regularly assess the academy's functioning, studying its strengths and weaknesses. This involves gathering feedback from key stakeholders, including students.
- Academy refinements are planned.** These reviews lead to plans to address any problems. Such plans include timetables and benchmarks for improvement.
- Changes reflect the academy's mission and goals.** The refinements refer back to the academy's underlying mission and goals.